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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to identify characteristics of at-risk students and review certain circumstances that affect their decisions to leave or stay in school. Mail survey responses were collected from 272 students (out of a total of 300) in 15 rural Tennessee high schools. The subjects were identified by their guidance counselors as being at risk of dropping out. At-risk students frequently have been shown to be older males, often from low socioeconomic backgrounds, who possess low basic academic skills. The mother's educational background and her aspirations for her children's educational attainment strongly influence their decisions regarding school. A majority of at-risk students live with their mothers in a single-parent home. More than 70% said their birth parents were divorced. Some 47% stated they had jobs. More than half preferred a job to staying in school. Eighty-six percent revealed that they consume alcohol on an average of four times a week and 73% used other drugs regularly. Almost half of the students had experienced some problems in school, and more than 33% had appeared in juvenile court before age 15. More than half had experienced physical abuse. Most did not involve themselves in extra-school activities and 61% said they did not believe that a high school education was important. Effective dropout prevention programs use a combination of mentorships, counseling, remediation, social services, and other incentives to keep students in school. Early identification and personalized intervention programs are essential to disrupting the cycle that leaves many students dysfunctional in today's complex society. (TES)

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A STUDY OF CHARACTERISTICS PROFILING AT-RISK STUDENTS AND INFLUENCES IMPACTING THEIR RURAL ENVIRONMENT

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by

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A Study of Characteristics Profiling At-Risk Students and Influences Impacting Their Rural Environment

Introduction and Problem Statement

Each year almost 800,000 students drop out of school (Education Commission of the States, 1989). Dropouts are usually from the "at-risk" category of students. At-risk is a term used to describe those students who share certain characteristics indicative of a potential dropout. The primary influences impacting at-risk students are low socioeconomic backgrounds, race, family status, and urban or rural South. (Wehlage, Rutter, and Turnbaugh, 1987). It is necessary that school officials and other service agency personnel be aware and recognize the characteristics of at-risk students so that they can provide needed programs and services. These initiatives should help prevent dropouts from occurring.

Purposes of the Study

The purposes of the study were to determine the characteristics of at-risk students and review certain circumstances impacting on their lives.

Research Procedure

A questionnaire was prepared and sent to a guidance counselor in each of 15 rural high schools throughout Tennessee. Each guidance counselor distributed the

questionnaire to 20 students considered to be at-risk for a total of 300 students. All 300 questionnaires were returned, however, 28 were incomplete and were deemed unusable. A total of 272 questionnaires were acceptable and the data collected were reported in the study.

Discernible Characteristics from the Literature

Various studies and youth oriented agencies have been concerned with the identification of characteristics indicating at-risk students. During the third annual Meharry Medical College Conference on Health Care for the Poor and Underserved it was noted that millions of children are in the at-risk category (The Tennessean, October 1, 1990, B-1). It is important to determine which children are at-risk so that appropriate intervention may take place.

At-risk students often become dropouts from both school and society. Characteristically a school dropout is from a single-parent home, is academically deficient and has a negative self concept. In a recent article by Andrew Pazaruski reporting from "The High School and Beyond Study" a profile of at-risk students was indicated. The common charatertistics presented were:

Students are disproportionately from low socioeconomic status families.

Students are disporportionately from socio-and/or ethnic minority groups.
Students are more frequently older and male.
Students are more likely to attend schools in urban areas in the south and west.
Families of at-risk students tend to provide fewer educational opportunities outside of school and place less value on education.
A mother's educational background and her aspirations for her children's educational attainment strongly influence decisions regarding school.
At-risk students have lower grades and test scores, more discipline problems, and have higher rates of absenteeism and tardiness.
(Pazaruski, 1990)

U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) statistics show that 4.3 million young people between the ages of 16 and 20 dropped out of school. Whites comprised 3.5 million of the dropouts, while 700,000 were blacks and 100,000 were from other racial groups. Moreover, male dropouts outnumbered female dropouts almost two to one. Also, it was stated that socioeconomically deprived students were three times more likely to dropout than the advantaged. Further, school-leaving rates had a tendency to increase with direct proportion to the number of students classified as poor. (Hahn, 1987)

Factors associated with "dropping out" are placed in a variety of categories. These include family background factors which characterize a potential dropout. This category involves socioeconomic status, low education and occupational attainment of parents, low family income, single-parent families, and speaking a language other then English in the home. It has been concluded that peer pressure is a decided factor when one drops out of rural schools. In the category of school related factors, such matters as poor academic achievement, truancy, and behavioral-discipline problems are prominent characteristics as well as certain individual or personal circumstances. For example, dropouts have very low self-esteem and a poor self-concept of themselves. Low educational and occupational aspirations along with a poor attitude toward school are apparent and a number of dropouts report that they leave school to get married or because they are pregnant. (Rumberger, 1987)

The National Center for Educational Statistics data concluded that students living in low income families or poverty situations, often from a minority family and possessing very low basic academic skills, are the leading candidates to become a dropout student. Among other characteristics established by this organization were lack of education among parents, who themselves may have been

dropouts, and a general lack of concern by the parents for their child's educational progress. (Kunisawa, 1988)

In his article "Dropout Prevention-Getting Serious About Programs that Work", Dale Mann generalizes concerning the at-risk or dropout problem. Mann estimates that boys constitute 54% of the nation's dropouts, with 51% of the boys dropping out for school-related reasons, 21% for economic reason, five percent for family reasons, and 22% for other reasons. A very interesting statement in this article concerning blacks and whites, who are poor, was very thought provoking. Mann stated, "Black youths who are poor, stay in school more than do white youths, who are poor, but is this because of perseverance in school or discrimination in the labor market". Of all girls dropping out of school Mann reports that 45% left because they were pregnant, 37% because they got married, and 18% because home care responsibilities necessitated them to stay home. (Mann, 1986)

An analysis of the literature and selected research studies concerning at-risk students indicates some nine primary characteristics of potential dropouts or troubled students:

1. History of grade level retention in school
2. Deficient academic performance
3. Dislike for school and related activities

4. Frequent problems resulting in school supervision or explusion
5. Fathering a child/pregnancy
6. Family situation/financial situation
7. Need to enter work force
8. Learning difficulties/emotional problems
9. Personal adjustment problem

Early indentification of at-risk students is esssential to disrupting the cycle that leave many students dysfunctional in today's complex society. Personalized intervention programs must be planned to address this critical issue.

If they are to be effective dropout prevention programs require a comprehensive, integrated effort that combines the following components:

mentorships and intensive, sustained counseling for troubled youngsters;
an array of social services, including health care, family planning education, and infant care facilities for adolescent mothers;
concentrated remediation using individualized instruction and competency-based curricula;
an effective school/business collaboration that provides ongoing access to the mainstream economy;
improved incentives, including financial rewards, for completing high school;

year-round schools and alternative schools; heightened accountability for dropout rates at all levels of the system of public education; and involvement of parents and community organizations in dropout prevention. (Hahn, 1987)

Report of Data Collected

1. With whom do you live?

Both parents	63	(23%)
Mother only	135	(50%)
Father only	11	(4%)
With Step Parent	50	(18%)
Other	13	(5%)

2. Are your birth parents divorced?

yes	no
196 (72%)	76 (28%)

Chi Square 52.94 significant at .001

3. Do both parents or the person(s) with whom you live work outside the home?

yes	no
179 (66%)	93 (34%)

Chi square 44.59 significant at .001

4. Approximate family income:

Above 35,000	7 (3%)
25,000 - 34,999	45 (17%)
15,000 - 24,999	82 (30%)
Below 15,000	138 (51%)

5. Do you work after school and/or on weekends?

yes	no
127 (47%)	145 (53%)

Chi square 1.19 not significant (.2747)

6. I had rather get a job to earn a living than to go to school.

yes	no
147 (54%)	125 (46%)

Chi square 1.78 not significant (.1792)

7. Are you required to be at home by a certain time?

On school nights

yes	no	mean time
22 (8%)	250 (92%)	12:00 mid-night

Chi square 191.12 significant at .001

On other nights

yes	no	mean time
17 (6%)	255 (94%)	2:00 a.m.

Chi square 208.27 significant at .001

8. (a) Do you consume alcohol?

yes	no
233 (86%)	39 (14%)

Chi square 138.37 significant at .001

(b) How often do you consume alcohol?

mean - 4 times per week

(c) At what age did you first use alcohol?

mean age 12.6

9. (a) Have you used other drugs (other than alcohol)?

yes	no
198 (73%)	74 (27%)

Chi square 56.53 significant at .001

(b) How often do you use these drugs?

mean - 3 times each week

(c) At what age did you start?

mean age 13.6

10. Have you ever been assigned to in-school suspension or expelled from school?

yes	no
121 (44%)	151 (56%)

Chi square 3.31 not significant (.0659)

11. (a) Have you had to appear in juvenile court?

yes	no
103 (38%)	169 (62%)

Chi square 16.00 significant at .001

(b) Age you were first referred to the juvenile court.

mean age - 14.3

12. (a) Why were you taken to court?

Absenteeism	71
Substance abuse	89
Violance or vandalism	32
Other reasons (runaway)	7

(b) Are you on probation?

yes	no
39 (38%)	64 (62%)

Chi square 6.07 significant at .05

13. (a) Have you experienced physical abuse at home?

yes	no
147 (54%)	125 (46%)

Chi square 1.78 not significant (.1792)

(b) How were you abused:

68	Beaten or whipped
13	Tied up or restrained
71	Slapped or punched
21	Burned, scalded or shocked
33	Shaken excessively
5	Other (3 reported being locked up and 2 choked)

(c) Did you receive an injury from the physical abuse?

21	Burns
43	Internal injuries
79	Bruises
15	Severe cuts
37	Broken bones
2	Other (Reported mouth worked on)

14. Can you openly discuss problems with parents?

yes	no
33 (12%)	239 (88%)

Chi square 156.00 significant at .001

15. Do you participate in co-curricular activities and other related school events?

yes	no
24 (9%)	248 (91%)

Chi square 183.50 significant at .001

16. Do you think that a high school education is important?

yes	no
106 (39%)	166 (61%)

Chi square 13.24 significant at .001

17. I am able to get along with my teachers?

yes	no
84 (31%)	188 (69%)

Chi square 39.76 significant at .001

18. Is your present school program preparing you for a job?

yes	no
29 (11%)	243 (89%)

Chi square 168.37 significant at .001

19. Do you intend to drop out of school when legally possible?

yes	no
169 (62%)	103 (38%)

Chi square 166.02 significant at .001

Summary of Findings

A majority of the students in the study reported that they lived with their mothers in a single-parent home. Over 70 percent stated that their birth parents were divorced. It is noteworthy that both parents, or the family member with whom the student presently lived, worked outside the home. Also, 51 percent of the respondents lived in a home in which the family income was below $15,000 annually.

Some 47 percent indicated that they had employment, while 53 percent did not. Over half stated that they would prefer to get a job and drop out of school. The group queried seemed to have little control imposed on them concerning a curfew on school nights or at other times. Only eight percent were required to be at home at a certain time on school nights and six percent had limits placed on them during the weekends.

A distressing 86 percent revealed that they consume alcohol on an average of four times per week. Equally disturbing is the fact that 73 percent used other drugs regularly. Over one-third of those in the sample have had to appear in juvenile court before age 15. Almost half of the students had experienced some problems in school. About a third of the students were on probation.

It was found that over half of the students in the study had experienced physical abuse. The types of abuse included beatings, being slapped, and being shaken excessively.

Most of the students in the at-risk category did not involve themselves in extra-school related activities. Indeed, 61 percent revealed that they did not believe that a high school education was important. Most of the group did not consider that their present school programs were preparing them for a job. Related to this statistic is the desire of over half of the group to drop out of school when legally possible.

The study revealed the primary characteristics of at-risk students within the school environment. Additionally certain personal information was determined showing influences which contributed to this phenomonen. School officials should give special attention to these vulnerable students. School programs should be initiated or revised to include this disinfranchasized group and assure that they find success in the school environment.

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